

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 IO-13 ISO-00 NEAE-00 SSM-03 CIAE-00
DODE-00 NSAE-00 NSCE-00 SSO-00 USIE-00 INRE-00
PM-05 H-01 INR-10 L-03 PA-01 SP-02 SS-15 ACDA-12
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FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 7187
INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN
AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMCONSUL JERUSALEM
AMEMBASSY JIDDA
AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
USMISSION USUN NY

C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 1417

E.O. 11652: XGDS-1
TAGS: PEPR, PLO, SY, LE, IS
SUBJECT: SYRIAN REACTION TO FATAH ATTACK IN ISRAEL

1. SUMMARY: SYRIANS DO NOT APPEAR TO BE ENTHUSIASTIC ABOUT FATAH TERRORIST ATTACK IN ISRAEL. WITH ISRAELIS ALREADY NERVOUS ABOUT SAIQA MOVES IN SOUTH, FATAH ATTACK INCREASES POSSIBILITY OF ISRAELI RETALIATION THERE. ANY SUCH ISRAELI REACTION CAN ONLY INCREASE THE PROBLEMS FOR SYRIA'S LEBANON POLICY. END SUMMARY.

2. SYRIAN MEDIA COVERAGE OF TERRORIST ACTION NEAR TEL AVIV HAS BEEN SURPRISINGLY LIMITED. ON MARCH 12 PRESS CARRIED NEWS AGENCY REPORTS OF AL-FATAH'S VERSION OF THE ATTACK AS A SECONDARY ITEM ON FRONT PAGES. IN ADDITION TO FATAH VERSION, PRESS CARRIED AFP AND ISRAELI RADIO REPORTS OF THE ACTION, BUT EDITED OUT INFORMATION WHICH WOULD CONTRADICT FATAH
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CLAIM ATTACK WAS CARRIED OUT ON MILITARY TARGETS AND CASUALTIES WERE AMONG MILITARY AND POLICE PERSONNEL. BY MARCH 13 STORY, WHILE STILL FRONT PAGE MATERIAL, WAS TREATED AS MINOR ITEM. SYRIAN RADIO HAS CHARACTERIZED ATTACK AS A "BOLD" STROKE.

3. BAATH COLUMNIST ABDU-ILAH AL-MALLAH, WHO RECENTLY

RETURNED FROM US VISITOR PROGRAM, WROTE SOLE EDITORIAL ON THE TERROSIST ATTACK. HE SAID: "HOWEVER THE OPERATION ENDED, IT MADE ITS POINT. THE IMPLICATIONS ARE HIGHLIGHTED BY DEFMIN WEIZMAN'S RETURN FROM WASHINGTON AND PRIMIN BEGIN'S DELAY OF HIS TRIP. THE OPERATION IS BOUND TO RENEW THE DISCUSSION OF ISRAELI EXPANSIONISM AND THE NEGATIVE IMPACT OF THE FLOW OF AMERICAN ARMS TO ISRAEL ON THE CHERISHED AND JUST PEACE. THIS OPERATION SHOULD BE UNDERSTOOD AS BEING IN KEEPING WITH THE UNITED NATIONS CHARTER AND INTERNATIONAL LAW AND AS BEING A SERIOUS CONTRIBUTION TO INTERNATIONAL EFFORTS TO BRING ABOUT THE JUST PEACE WHICH ISRAEL IS OBSTRUCTING. IT SHOULD NOT BE RULED OUT THAT THIS OPERATION WILL BE A BEGINNING FOR A NEW STAGE OF THE THUS FAR INCONCLUSIVE CONFLICT."

4. THE SYRIAN PRESS, WHICH WE CAN SAFELY SAY REFLECTS SARG THINKING, DOES NOT APPEAR TO BE ENTHUSIASTIC ABOUT THE FATAH ATTACK. EDITORIAL SEEMS DESIGNED TO TURN ATTACK TO BEST ADVANTAGE BY CLAIMING THAT SUCH EVENTS WILL BE THE FRUIT OF ISRAELI OBSTRUCTIONISM SUPPORTED BY US ARMS. NEVERTHELESS, THE EDITORIAL STRIKES US AS DEFENSIVE IN TONE.

5. SYRIANS MUST BE NERVOUS ABOUT EXPECTED RETALIATION IN SOUTH LEBANON AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SYRIA'S LEBANON POLICY. SYRIA SEEMS TO HAVE BEEN ENGAGED RECENTLY IN CAUTIOUS ATTEMPTS TO INCREASE ITS CONTROL IN SOUTH LEBANON THROUGH REPOSITIONING SAIQA UNITS. ZUHAIR MUHSIN, SAIQA COMMANDER, CONFIDENTIAL

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TOLD UK EMBOFF THAT WHILE THERE WAS TO BE NO INCREASE IN SAIQA STRENGTH IN THE SOUTH, THERE HAD BEEN SOME REPOSITIONING OF FORCES. ARTICLE IN SAIQA MAGAZINE VANGUARD FEB 28 CLAIMS UNITS WERE MOVING INTO AREA OF TYRE WHILE AT SAME TIME OFFICES OF ALL PALESTINIAN ORGANIZATIONS IN TOWNS AND VILLAGES WERE BEING CLOSED TO ALLEVIATE STRAINS THAT HAD OCCURRED WITH LOCAL POPULACE.

6. SYRIANS FULLY AWARE THEY WALK A TIGHTROPE IN THE SOUTH WITH LIMITED CONTROL OVER EVENTS THERE. SINCE ISRAELIS WERE ALREADY NERVOUS ABOUT SAIQA MOVES, FATAH ATTACK INCREASES POSSIBILITY ISRAELIS WILL INTERVENE. THIS PROMISES TO INCREASE HEADACHES SYRIANS FACE IN LEBANON AND MAY EXPLAIN RELATIVELY LUKEWARM REACTION TO THIS LATEST TERRORIST ATTACK. MURPHY

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